

The new republic of childhood. Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman. Oxford University Press, 1990. 400 pp., \$19.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540576-5.

It was Judith Saltman who introduced me to Sheila Egoff. After a guided tour of the impressive Children's Literature Collection at The University of British Columbia (largely Sheila's work), Judith led me ever deeper into the back of the library. It may be a trick of memory, but the nearer we got to Sheila's inner sanctum, the higher and more precariously stacked the books seemed to be: like the mountains outside. Finally, in the heart of the library, surrounded by the very highest piles of books, sat Sheila, writing in longhand.

That is the image I carry with me into *The new republic of childhood*. Judith Saltman and Sheila Egoff know more children's books (not just Canadian ones) than the rest of us. Like the mountains, they both ought to be protected national resources.

Rather than simply accommodating the large numbers of new Canadian children's books published in the fifteen years, *The new republic of childhood* evolves from the two previous editions. It is moving from a book about what is in books, towards being the sort of book you read if you want to know what to **think** about books. Canadian books are discussed in the context of books from other countries, and in the light of shifting cultural sensibilities. As an example, I particularly liked a comment in a new section on Canadian Young Adult novels: "[R]ebels or misfits of the order of Holden Caulfield are absent. Typical Canadian restraint prevails" (75). Wonderful insight. It is our "Canadian restraint" that makes us different. But I am afraid I have not quoted the passage exactly. I wanted to point out the sharpness of the insight before commenting on the sloppy proof-reading. The passage reads "misfits *or* the order" instead of "of the order". Which is a shame.

There are other examples of sloppy proof-reading. In a discussion of *The Whale People* by Roderick Haig-Brown, a tribe is incorrectly named as "Tsitidat," when it is "Tsitikat" (correct in the second edition). It would, however, be churlish of me to nit-pick about proof-reading or anything else for that matter. *The new republic of childhood* is an essential book. Without it there is no history of Canadian Children's Literature. And without a history there is no future.

So instead of complaints, I'd like to end this review with some suggestions for the next edition, things I hope are in the spirit of the way Saltman and Egoff track books that define and are defined by our culture. Besides a new proof-reader, someone ought to rethink the desirable characteristics of heroines. I have an immediate urge to strangle anyone tagged as "feisty" or "spunky." Heroines of that order seem to be legion in Canadian Children's Literature.

My next suggestion is more problematic, and it relates to the only place in the book where I am troubled. Much of the section on Native legends has been retained from the earlier edition, and contains a kind of inherent (de)valuation clearly not intended. References to Native stories as "rough-hewn," "crude," and as having "intrinsic deficiencies of artistry" (187, 189), may have passed invisibly before the eyes of readers in 1975, but they do not now. Not in the light of critics like Walter Onga and Sally Price. In *Orality and literacy* (Methuen, 1982), Ong teaches us to use the term "oral" instead of "pre-literate," and to unthink our literate biases about features like repetition. In *Primitive art in civilized places* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), Price exposes our cultural biases on issues like originality and connoisseurship, and shows how we thoughtlessly impose our value systems on other people's stories. I know Saltman and Egoff have already done a lot of critical reading for *The new republic of childhood*, and it shows in the shift away from a New critical bias. Will there be more evidence of feminist and other forms of post-structuralist theory in the next edition? And more about publishing and editors and anecdotal gossip on some of the texts? I hope so. I'm looking forward to it.

In the meantime, what marks *The new republic of childhood* is the literacy, sensitivity and erudition of its authors. Saltman and Egoff not only tell us where we've been, but help us figure out where we are going. Everyone interested in Canadian Children's Literature ought to buy a copy.

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MUNSCH: CHAOTIC COMEDY AND FEEBLE PHILOSOPHY

Giant: or waiting for the Thursday boat. Robert Munsch. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick, 1989. Unpag., \$14.95 \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-071-5, 1-55037-070-7; **Something good.** Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick, 1990. Unpag., \$12.95 \$4.95. cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-099-5, 1-55037-100-2.

Like Robert Munsch's earlier books, *Something good* and *Giant: or waiting for the Thursday boat* create comedy by mixing together exaggerated turmoil, incompetent adults, and children who solve adult problems. Both develop themes of identity and acceptance, but they differ significantly in form. The first is formulaic Munsch, familiar domestic farce in which both adults and children will recognize their own foibles. The second, like a *A promise is a promise*, bases the plot on folklore, not modern events. Although graced with Gilles Tibo's whimsical illustrations, it is less a refreshing change for a writer whose